

South Florida Ecosystem Restoration Land Acquisition Strategy

DRAFT Executive Summary

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Introduction

The South Florida ecosystem is an 18,000 square mile region that includes all or part of 16 counties with over 6 million human inhabitants. This water-dominated system stretches from the Kissimmee River Basin-Lake Okeechobee system to the coral reefs in the Atlantic Ocean and from the Caloosahatchee to the St. Lucie estuaries. Efforts started before 1948 to provide water and flood control for urban and agricultural lands have been effective. Another goal of these efforts, to ensure a water supply for Everglades National Park, has not yet been accomplished.

The region's hydrology has been significantly altered. The Everglades are only about half of its original size, and the canal system drains about 1.7 billion gallons of water per day into the ocean and the gulf. The sustainability of the South Florida ecosystem is in jeopardy. In response to this crisis, the federal, state, regional, local governments and two American Indian Tribes have committed to the restoration of the South Florida ecosystem, which includes the Everglades. The Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP) is a crucial, 39 year, \$8.2 billion component of the restoration initiative. The cost share for CERP is 50% federal and 50% non-federal sponsors.

Land acquisition is critical to South Florida ecosystem restoration efforts. Land is needed to preserve habitat for native plants and animals and to act as a buffer to existing natural areas. Land is also needed for water quality treatment areas, water storage reservoirs, and aquifer recharge areas that will help restore natural hydrology. As of September 2001, about 5.6 million acres have been identified as necessary for habitat protection. About 3.4 million acres have been acquired, with 927,125 acres remaining to be purchased. [>>some conflict between numbers here and below in "Who is involved". Need to resolve this. Perhaps the 3.4 million is only state-acquired lands.] The initial estimate for the CERP portion was that roughly 220,000 acres at an estimated cost of \$2.2 billion in 1999 dollars would be needed.

Purpose

The purpose of this document is to describe a strategy for land acquisition needed for South Florida ecosystem restoration projects that are either wholly federally funded or jointly funded by federal and non-federal sponsors. The strategy identifies lands needed for restoration, estimates the cost of land acquisition for the restoration initiative, and measures progress in acquiring lands for the restoration.

Who Is Involved

The South Florida Ecosystem Restoration Task Force (Task Force) consists of federal, state, local and tribal representatives. The members of the Task Force have been engaged in the protection and restoration of the South Florida Ecosystem for many years prior to the formation of the Task Force.

State and federal agencies already manage 4.7 million acres of land important to ecosystem restoration in South Florida. Approximately 4.55 million acres are for habitat purposes and 0.15 million acres for water storage. The State of Florida (including the South Florida Water Management District and local governments) has acquired 3.5 million acres of habitat conservation land in South Florida at a cost of \$1.5 billion. However, the condition of the ecosystem continues to deteriorate. This continued deterioration has necessitated a more comprehensive approach to protection, preservation and restoration.

The Task Force and its Working Group coordinate and track the work of the restoration. However, the Task Force does not have oversight or project authority. Each member entity retains its authority, jurisdiction, and mission. The Working Group member agencies responsible for land acquisition participated in this initial assessment of the lands needed to accomplish the ecosystem restoration goals of the Task Force.

Goals of the Restoration

The South Florida Ecosystem Restoration goals are: Goal 1: Get the water right; Goal 2: Restore, preserve, and protect natural habitats and species; and, Goal 3: Foster compatibility of the built and natural systems. Land acquisition is an essential part of achieving these goals. This strategy document reflects land acquisition necessary for achievement of Goals 1 and 2. The Task Force is developing the objectives needed to achieve Goal 3. Future editions of the Land Acquisition Strategy will incorporate the lands needed for this goal.

General Accounting Office (GAO) and the Land Acquisition Task Team

In its April 2000 review of the South Florida Ecosystem Restoration Initiative, the General Accounting Office (GAO) recognized that the South Florida Ecosystem Restoration Initiative is a complex, long-term effort that will take more than 20 years. The GAO report stated that the development of a single land acquisition plan would be valuable in coordinating the member agencies' land acquisition activities. The intent is to aid the Task Force in (1) determining how much land will be needed to accomplish its goals; (2) estimate the full cost of acquiring these lands, (3) measure progress in acquiring lands for the restoration, and (4) increase the chance that the lands acquired are those most needed.

The Working Group established a Land Acquisition Task Team to prepare a land acquisition strategy and address the GAO recommendations. The Working Group instructed the Team to identify Goal 1 and Goal 2 South Florida ecosystem restoration land acquisition projects that are entirely federally funded or jointly funded by the federal government and a non-federal sponsor or sponsors. The projects include additions and inholdings of existing federal conservation lands and joint projects, such as CERP, that contribute to the overall environment and human habitability of South Florida. Related land acquisition projects without any federal funding were to be addressed in appendices.

SOUTH FLORIDA ECOSYSTEM RESTORATION LAND ACQUISITION STRATEGY

Identification of Lands Needed

Member agencies engaged in acquiring lands for restoration activities utilized comprehensive processes to identify those lands needed for restoration. The processes may vary from agency to agency. Identification of projects is often a continuing process. Boundaries are refined as additional information and analyses are developed.

Land Acquisition Funding

A variety of funding sources are available to achieve the South Florida Ecosystem Restoration. Many of the funding sources may be used for both Goal 1 and Goal 2.

The State of Florida is a full partner in CERP implementation, having adopted the Everglades Restoration Investment Act in 2000, which provides \$100 million per year for 10 years. The amount will be matched with local sponsor funds and credits for a total of \$200 million per year for 10 years. These monies are deposited in the Save Our Everglades Trust Fund. SFWMD *ad valorem* tax revenue may be used for CERP and other Goal 1 land acquisitions.

Florida Forever funds are an essential component to both Goal 1 and Goal 2 land acquisition projects. Special Florida legislative appropriations have also provided funds. Local governments have contributed to the purchase of SFER-related lands.

The Department of the Interior has a history of grants to the SFWMD for land acquisition under the DOI's Annual Appropriations Bill and through the Farm Bill. The Department of the Interior also manages the Land and Water Conservation Fund with the ability to transfer monies from this fund to the SFWMD for land purchases. Federal funds for national park and national wildlife refuge land acquisitions are provided through Congressional appropriations.

Timing of Acquisitions

The timing of land acquisition for Goal 1 projects is critical, as project construction cannot begin until lands are acquired. The success of many of the CERP projects depends on the successful implementation of other parts of the restoration plan. Failure to obtain critical parcels in a timely manner can result in delays and reconfiguration not just for one project, but for other related projects as well. Land acquisition for Goal 2, such as to complete park and refuge boundaries, is also a multi-year process. The lands must be acquired before the on-site resources are destroyed.

The project schedules and the projections of outputs included in this report span multiple decades and depend upon certain planning assumptions about state and federal budget requests and funding levels, optimized construction schedules, willing sellers, and other contingencies. These assumptions are likely to change the project progresses, and appropriate revisions to this strategy document will be necessary.

Costing of Real Estate

Cost estimates for CERP lands contained on the Project Profile Sheets are generally in 1999 dollars. The land cost estimates include the cost of the land plus other costs incurred in the land acquisition process. This includes staff time for land acquisition, federal review of the acquisition process, relocation costs, contingency allowances, etc. Some cost estimates have

been updated as more detailed planning progresses or as acquisition progresses. Estimates for Goal 2 projects are generally based on fair market value and do not include associated acquisition costs.

Project Profile Sheets

A project profile was completed for each federal or joint state-federal South Florida ecosystem restoration project that requires land acquisition. Each profile contains the information requested by the GAO and other information to enhance coordination among the restoration participants. Basic information such as project name, purpose, estimated cost, acquisition agency and when the land will be needed for related restoration projects is included, as well as other information such as funding source, overlapping projects, project synonyms, and a contact person's name. The Project Profile sheet relates each project to the Goals, Subgoals and Objectives of the Task Force. Project profile information is summarized in a table.

Map of the South Florida Ecosystem Restoration Land Acquisition Strategy

Each of the projects addressed in the project profiles is represented on the map and labeled. Existing conservation lands throughout the South Florida ecosystem restoration are shown to provide context for the projects.

Summary of Goal 1 Lands

The Task Force will achieve Goal 1: Get the Water Right through the implementation of the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Project (CERP) and other authorized modifications to the C&SF System. There are 44 projects with federal and joint federal/state land acquisition dollars identified for Goal 1. An estimated 420,538 acres are needed with 215,140 acres (51%) acquired to date. The total estimated cost of these lands is \$2,548,936,000 with an estimated \$1,974,726,000 needed to complete acquisition of these parcels.

Summary of Goal 2 Lands

The acquisition of lands that provide habitat for native plants and animals and act as a buffer to existing natural areas is an important component of the Task Force's strategy to achieve Goal 2: Restore, Preserve, and Protect Natural Habitats and Species. Some Goal 1 projects that provide water quality treatment areas, water storage reservoirs, and aquifer recharge with a primary goal of restoring the natural hydrology will also provide habitat for native flora and fauna. There are 10 projects with federal and joint federal/state land acquisition dollars identified for Goal 2. Approximately 957,196 acres have been identified with 927,919 acres (97%) acquired to date. The total estimated cost of these lands is \$445,774,000 with an estimated \$181,402,000 needed to complete acquisition on these parcels.

Future

This initial Land Acquisition Strategy provides a structure for identifying lands needed to accomplish the goals of the Task Force. It also measures and reports on the acquisition of identified lands. The Strategy provides an overall picture for those responsible for providing funds for land acquisition, and also furnishes cooperating agencies and programs with a perspective on how their current and potential land acquisition projects relate and contribute to the vision of the Task Force.

The Strategy will be updated on an annual basis. Updates will reflect the increased certainty of which lands are needed for the ecosystem restoration, and will report on the progress made in acquiring those lands.